

Opening Remarks at 2008 Water Sciences Forum

Dr. Paula J. Dobriansky

**Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs
U.S. Department of State**

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Thank you. Dr. Bement, Dr. Hays, Director General Matsuura, Dr. Hirsch, Ambassador Oliver, Dr. Fedoroff and, of course, distinguished guests. It is my great pleasure to welcome you all here today.

As Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs, when I first began talking about water issues in 2002 and 2003, much of the international community still needed convincing. Today, each of you probably know the statistics by heart – more than 1 billion people lack access to safe drinking water and more than 2 billion lack access to basic sanitation; on any given day, 50 percent of the world's hospital beds are filled with people suffering from water-related illnesses; for every dollar invested in water or sanitation, the return can be as much as \$34 back. I could go on, but you all know how vitally important this is. Today, we know that few things are as critical to human health, as important to economic growth, and as necessary for long-term peace and security as access to safe and reliable supplies of water.

Two days from now in Sharm al-Shaikh, Egypt, African Heads of State will meet at the African Union Summit to discuss steps they can take to address water and sanitation challenges in Africa – and the United States will be there. Two weeks from now, water will be discussed among the leaders of the G-8 – and the United States will be there. And a few months from now, the world will meet at the Fifth World Water Forum in Istanbul to catalyze global action – and the United States will be there.

In addition to our efforts to build political will and increase international attention and action on water and sanitation issues, the United States has strengthened our own commitment and our capacity to address water and sanitation challenges. On December 1, 2005, President Bush signed into law the Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act of 2005. The Act makes water and sanitation issues a priority for U.S. foreign assistance and asks the Secretary of State, working closely with USAID and other U.S. technical agencies, to develop and implement a strategy for increasing access to safe water and sanitation in developing countries.

Since the passage of the Act, the United States has committed over \$3 billion for water and sanitation issues in more than 50 countries worldwide. In 2007, the U.S. committed more than \$600 million in Africa alone. Let me give you a few examples of how we're carrying out this work:

- First, we have developed a strategy that defines U.S. goals and objectives on water to meet broader demands, such as food production, energy and the environment, and reducing risks, such as those associated with the predicted impacts of climate change;

- Second, we have identified priority countries based on the level of need and the potential for achieving meaningful results.
- Third, USAID and the Department of State have crafted for the first time a guide for all missions abroad describing how the U.S can invest its resources to address these challenges. This coordinated global effort is significant and groundbreaking.
- Finally, we have also advanced region-specific water and sanitation strategies.

Perhaps most important, our efforts are delivering results on the ground. In addition to the millions who received improved access to drinking water and sanitation services in 2007, more than 2 million people in Africa and Asia received “first-time” access to an improved water source and more than 1.5 million received “first-time” access to sanitation services. These are among the poorest of the poor.

But we still have more to do. A key element of the U.S. strategy is investment in science and technology. U.S. expertise on water issues is world renowned. Experts from United States technical agencies, academia, the private sector, and other non-government organizations are advancing our understanding of the water cycle, improving the technologies for managing water wisely, and developing new approaches for addressing some of our most pressing challenges on the ground.

What I find particularly exciting is the number of experts working out in the field to create locally-developed approaches to some of our most basic challenges like disinfecting water. Rather than exporting “U.S.” solutions, these experts are working within local communities to find solutions derived from local materials, based on local practices. For example, some communities are experimenting with filters that use construction nails to remove arsenic from drinking water. This is the kind of innovation that we think can deliver real progress, the development of approaches that communities can build, market, and embrace as their own.

The State Department is very pleased to host all of you here today. As I said, five years ago we were struggling to make the case for water – it is very rewarding now to see the interest that exists and the potential to develop new partnerships that can fundamentally change the lives of so many people around the world. I look forward to learning about the results of your discussions.

Thank you.